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Let officials write

FOR a democratic nation to progress, its citizenry should know not only the decisions that their government makes, but also the processes by which they were reached.

Permitting such information to become public produces short-term challenges for a government, which frequently finds its judgment called into question. Yet the long-term result is a stronger nation.

Over the years part of bureaucracy's penchant for self-protection has been to try to restrict the potentially troublesome information that comes to light. Resisting such efforts is a responsibility of the public, and of the press as the public's representative.

A bill soon to be before the full House of Representatives would help. It would prevent Uncle Sam from trying to make thousands of top and middle-level government officials, present and past, submit all future writings and speeches to federal agencies for publication clearance. In essence, this is censorship. The measure would permit the government to require pre-publication clearance of employees of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency.

In addition the proposal, approved by the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee, would forbid the government from requiring that its employees take lie detector tests, except during criminal investigations.

These issues are not hypothetical. In the spring of 1983 President Reagan signed an order that substantially raised the number of government officials required to obtain pre-publication approval. The order also permitted the increase the use of lie detector tests.

This executive order was an effort on the part of the administration to deal with an age-old problem: stemming the leaking of information the government would prefer to keep secret. Such disclosures are potentially harmful if they violate national security, or jeopardize the safety of people who gather security information.

Efforts ought to be made to prevent disclosures within these relatively narrow confines. National security must be protected; but the phrase national security should not be employed, as it has been in recent decades, to protect information that is merely embarrassing.

The administration order cast its net too broadly, and produced an uproar from many people and organizations. If it remained in effect, they noted, the nation would be deprived of the knowledge and wisdom of its finest public servants, whose important counsel ought to be available to the public. As a result of the protests, the order was rescinded eleven months later.

The issue, however, did not go away. Some 120,000 federal employees have already agreed to lifetime pre-publication censorship, under terms of the 11-month order. And in recent years federal agencies have increased their use of lie detector tests among employees.

Legitimate national-security issues should be protected. But Congress should take action to prevent any future administration from issuing executive orders that are too inclusive. And to prevent a steady increase, in individual government departments, of the number of people subjected unnecessarily to lie detector tests.

The proposal in the House is a good place to start. The House has sufficient time, but barely, to approve the measure between its post-Labor Day return and its adjournment for the campaign. Since no similar proposal is

pending in the Senate, the time is too short to expect that body to pass a similar bill this year. But it should approve one in the next Congress, which begins in January.